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Gender Roles in *Australia*

In England in the 1940’s, men and women had their specific places in society. Men were aristocrats, businessmen, or laborers. Lords and dukes rarely got their hands dirty and cared little for the lives of those below them on the social ladder. Aristocratic women supported their husbands’ and fathers’ endeavors through playing hostess for social events and accompanying their husband as trophies, but did little else; there were nannies to take care of children and servants to do the housework.

In the film *Australia*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, gender roles in England and Australia are an important underlying theme. The film begins in 1939 and continues into the early 1940s at the beginning of World War II (Australia (2008) - Synopsis). Lady Sarah Ashley, played by Nicole Kidman, travels from England to northern Australia where her husband, Lord Ashley, is currently residing on his cattle ranch, Faraway Downs. Lady Ashley is the typical aristocratic woman; she travels by airplane with a cacophony of fancy luggage and clothing (Australia (2008) - Synopsis). Upon her arrival in Darwin, Australia, Lady Ashley meets Drover, played by Hugh Jackman, who has been hired to transport her to Faraway Downs. Drover is a hard worker, with the body to prove it, and is a rigid, rugged character. His job is to drive cattle and horses, and he forthright declares that no man can hire, nor fire, him. Drover is a loner, aside from his two aboriginal driving partners. Immediately, Lady Ashley, the clean, prim and proper woman from England, takes an immediate dislike to the sweaty, dirty Drover as he slams another man over the head with one of her travel bags during a bar fight (Australia (2008) - Synopsis).

Throughout the film, Sarah Ashley undergoes several extensive transformations. As previously described, she starts out as a clean, prim and proper, stately woman from England. Early in the film, upon the death of her husband at Faraway Downs, she becomes the boss of the ranch and consequently, a businesswoman. Lady Ashley is faced with the decision of selling her property and business to her competitor, Carney Cattle, or managing the ranch herself. Upon learning her manager is working for Carney by stealing cattle from Faraway Downs, Lady Ashley makes the decision to not sell her ranch with determination to intensify competition with Carney. However, she needs a manager, so she turns to Drover, who immediately reprimands her for firing her old manager and his crew (Australia (2008) - Synopsis). Eventually though, Drover agrees to assist Lady Ashley in retrieving her cattle from the desert of Australia. Without the proper number of team members to successfully drive cattle, Lady Ashley joins her aborigine servants and learns how to drive the cattle from Drover and his two men. Together, they embark on a trip across Australia with determination to reach Darwin and sell their 1,500 heads of cattle to the army (Australia (2008) - Synopsis).

While packing for the adventure, Lady Ashley insists upon bringing much of her fancy luggage along for the drove, but about halfway through admits to having been foolish to bring such unnecessary baggage. This event marks the first transformation of Sarah Ashley from a British aristocrat to a hardworking, laboring woman in the Australian outback. At the same time, Sarah has been transforming into the mothering-type when one of her aborigine housemaids drowns leaving behind her half-white, half-aborigine son, Nullah. The young boy joins Lady Ashley on the drove and soon wins the love of Sarah Ashley. At the end of their quest, Lady Ashley, Drover, Nullah, and the rest of the small team reach Darwin and succeed in selling the cattle to the army. By this time, Sarah and Drover have abandoned their dislikes for each other and have become romantically involved. In Darwin, Lady Ashley is a hero in the eyes of the young women but as a disgrace to the older, more conservative women. For one thing, she is a woman doing a man’s job. Also, she is frowned upon for fondly associating with Drover because he is considered to be as good as black by many in the segregated town.

Throughout the rest of the movie, Sarah Ashley continues to go against society’s expectations for an aristocratic woman. She creates a family with Drover and Nullah, and continues to run Faraway Downs with them. When Nullah is taken away from her because he is half-blooded, Sarah falls into another stereotype of women involved with the war effort in hopes of getting Nullah back. She is given a job in the infantry battalion listening to radio reports along most of the other women in town. Finally, at the end of the film, Sarah, Drover, and Nullah are reunited and continue to live as a family.

Drover, the independent cattle driver, is another victim of stereotypes in *Australia*. He perfectly fits the tragic, loner stereotype of cattle drivers in the beginning of the film, but he evolves throughout the film. In the very beginning, Lady Ashley has pegged him as a pompous, disgusting man who exploits the aborigine women and is determined to have his way with her as well. Towards the middle of the movie, viewers learn that Drover is a widower of an aborigine woman who died from tuberculosis (Australia (2008) - Synopsis). Drover’s best friend and fellow cattle driver, Magarri, is the brother of Drover’s late wife – a fact which explains Drover’s rebellion against the segregation of the native Australian aborigines from the white settlers. Throughout the film, Drover breaks the stereotype of the loner and independent working man by becoming a warm, loving family man by balancing his home with Sarah and Nullah with his profession of driving cattle.

The white society of northern Australia, specifically in the town of Darwin, creates several stereotypes for the people of the area to fit in to. Women are either impoverished and grimy or well-off and never got their hands dirty. The Aboriginal people of Australia are outcasts and the lower class of society. Blacks are not allowed in the men’s or women’s taverns and have their own segregated public places such as the outdoor picture theater. Mixed aborigine and white children, such as Nullah, are termed ‘creamy’ and are sent to the Mission Island with the priests. When Sarah Ashley is frantically trying to keep Nullah from being taken to the island, the elder women in the town exclaimed their disproval of her love for the young creamy. However, the women of her own generation admire Lady Ashley for her affection for the unfortunate child. Specifically, the daughter of the owner of Carney Cattle takes great admiration to Lady Ashley. She soon comes to marry Fletcher, the ex-manager of Faraway Downs. Eventually Fletcher inherits Carney’s company, and when Nullah is taken from Sarah, his wife encourages him to help his old boss keep her child (Australia (2008) - Synopsis).

The men’s tavern in town is shown two times in particular – the first when Drover and Magarri try to enter together, but Magarri is not permitted to enter because he is black, and the second time when Lady Ashley and Drover have successfully driven the cattle onto the army’s ship and Sarah is denied entrance because she is a woman (Australia (2008) - Synopsis). Eventually, both Sarah and Magarri are admitted into the tavern upon the insistence of an angry Drover. In the very middle of the movie, Lady Ashley is patroness of a ball in town and once again fits into the prim and proper aristocratic stereotype, but she also remains dutiful to the unfortunate children on Mission Island and a businesswoman running Faraway Downs.

Often in film, women and men are put into specific stereotypes. Women characters are usually ““hyper-attractive” or “hypersexual” and/or passive” (Smith, Cooke). Women also rarely break the glass ceiling in film. In this sense, *Australia* goes completely against the norm of females in film. However, *Australia* portrays the normal thin, sexy female protagonist, which as stated by psychologist Sarah Murmen, “can lead girls to [participating] in very unhealthy behaviors to try to control weight” (Smith, Cooke). Lady Sarah Ashley perfectly fits the stereotype of “the daredevils” (Smith, Cooke). In this sense, Sarah Ashley is determined for Faraway Downs to succeed and is not willing to allow her love for Drover to interfere with that goal. Drover also fits into the stereotype that more often than not, women, not men, are looking for the long-term relationship. Lady Ashley pursues a relationship with Drover, while he in return is hesitant due to the loss of his first wife.

Although the society and culture in northern Australia and England mold people into strict stereotypes, special people such as Drover and Lady Sarah Ashley are able to become successful outside of their gender roles. They dare to follow their hearts and do what they see as morally right. As a result, both Drover and Lady Ashley gain enemies, but also many admirers and friends. As stated by Lady Sarah Ashley, “just because it is, doesn’t mean it should be” (Australia).That saying holds true for gender roles and encourages many to break free of the common stereotypes and be happy just as who they are.

Works Cited

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